

Gregory of Nyssa

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But chief of all Thy wondrous works,

Supreme of all Thy plan,

Thou hast put an upward reach

In the heart of Man.¹

The idea of a divinely granted “upward reach” would have resonated with Gregory of Nyssa, though he may have been inclined to replace the word “heart” with “mind.” “Who hath known the mind of the Lord?” he writes, quoting Paul (Rom. 11:34), and then “ask[s] further, who has understood *his own mind*?”² Being both incomprehensible, the two were mirrored likenesses in Gregory’s thought—the mind of man being the specific object to which Genesis was pointing in its declaration that man was created in the image of God.³ “The image is properly an image so long as it fails in none of the attributes which we perceived in the archetype,”⁴ he asserts, and since the other traits of humanity are decidedly *unlike* the Divine, only the mind reflects God’s image and is therefore fit to serve as the “ruling principle” in

¹ Harry Kemp, “God the Architect,” *The World’s Great Religious Poetry*, ed. Caroline Miles Hill (New York: Macmillan, 1954), 211.

² Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XI:2; emphasis added.

³ By “mind,” Gregory was not referring to the brain, or any other specific part of the body which can be “bounded by any limits of place,” but rather speaks in a more spiritual sense of that which animates and governs the whole body, something closer to what we would call the soul (he sometimes uses this word as well). See “On the Making of Man,” XII. “The mind is not restricted to any part of the body, but is equally in touch with the whole, producing its motion according to the nature of the part which is under its influence” (“On the Making of Man,” XIV:1).

⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XI:3.

human beings. As such, only the mind gives man his “upward reach,” or, as Gregory puts it, “the instincts for all that was excellent.”⁵

The mind’s likeness to the Divine is what connects creature to Creator,⁶ but its presence alongside the will of man keeps that connection from becoming eternally secure. “The mind, as being in the image of the most beautiful, itself also remains in beauty and goodness so long as it partakes as far as is possible in its likeness to the archetype; but if it were at all to depart from this it is deprived of that beauty in which it was.”⁷ Similarly, the other elements of humanity—passion, appetite, emotion—will share in the “true beauty” of the mind only “so long as [each one] keeps in touch” with the mind’s “superior nature.”⁸ In short, when we choose to permit it, “the mind is governed by God,” and it in turn “govern[s] our material life,”⁹ but what if we choose otherwise?

For most theologians, it was man’s mutability that posed a problem. God alone was perfectly unchanging, making the instability of man the obstacle to his salvation. Thus the weakness of Origen’s system, which emphasized freedom of the will to the point of leaving humanity—and even the Word of God—in constant flux between light and darkness, such that even when “saved” one was at best only a “once and future king.” Building on Origen’s foundation while trying to fix its flaws, Arius argued that immutability could be granted by God as a divine confirmation of a freely given human commitment. Changeable humans could therefore choose to follow God, who in turn could make that commitment unchangeable.

⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” chapter 5.

⁶ Drawing an analogy to the eye’s “fellowship with the light,” Gregory suggests, “so was it needful that a certain affinity with the Divine should be mingled with the nature of man, in order that by means of this correspondence it might aim at that which was native to it.” He repeats this idea a few lines later: “It was needful for man, born for the enjoyment of Divine good, to have something in his nature akin to that in which he is to participate.” Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” chapter 5.

⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XII:9.

⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XII:10.

⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XII: 13.

Athanasius, meanwhile, rejected both Origen and Arius, denying that a created being could ever become unchangeable, whether at creation or in the resurrection. Only through permanent union with the divine, made possible through the Incarnation of the Word, could immortality and stability be communicated to humanity.

Like his predecessors and contemporaries, Gregory of Nyssa acknowledged the fundamental difference between the immutability of God and the mutability of man. Whereas “the uncreated nature is also immutable, and always remains the same,” he admitted that “the created nature cannot exist without change.”¹⁰ However, this instability need not endanger our salvation, if we but yield to the “upward reach” within. Like the divine Archetype, “there is in us the principle of all excellence, all virtue and wisdom, and every higher thing that we conceive.” Granted, “pre-eminent among all is the fact that we are free,” and can therefore choose evil, but without that freedom neither could we truly choose good, for “that which is the result of compulsion and force cannot be virtue.”¹¹ Furthermore, Gregory saw that this freedom to choose—and to change—need not be made immutable, whether by confirmation or transformation, in order for man to be saved. Instead, he saw the negative *potential for* change as a positive *power to* change, imagining the distance between immutable Creator and changeable creature not as an abyss that keeps us from coming to God, but as a stairway that lead us upward to Him. Paradoxically, salvation did not come by *removing* man’s mutability, but by *preserving*

¹⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XVI:12. In “The Great Catechism,” Gregory made similar statements: “that alone is unchangeable in its nature which does not derive its origin through creation, while whatever by the uncreated being is brought into existence out of what was nonexistent, from the very first moment that it begins to be, is ever passing through change.” Chp. 8. Similarly, in *The Life of Moses* he writes, “Everyone knows that anything placed in a world of change never remains the same but is always passing from one state to another, the alteration always bringing about something better or worse.” Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, ed. Abraham Malherbe and Everett Ferguson (New York: Paulist Press, 1978), 55.

¹¹ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XVI: 11. Elsewhere Gregory called free will “that most excellent and precious of all goods . . . the gift implied in being his own master,” and asserted that it must be preserved in man for his goodness to ever truly reflect the image of God. “How can that nature which is under a yoke and bondage to any kind of necessity be called an image of a Master Being?” “The Great Catechism,” chapter 5.

it, allowing for the “perpetual progress” that brings us closer to the Divine. A “Fall” was not precluded by placing a rail around the balcony, but rather by pointing to stairways stretching infinitely into the distance.

For Gregory, the challenge is not the freedom of will that *allows* us to go downward, but rather the gravity that makes us liable to such descent. As he lamented, “the ruling element of our soul is more inclined to be dragged downwards by the weight of the irrational nature than is the heavy and earthy elements to be exalted by the loftiness of the intellect.”¹² Thus, vices come more easily than their corresponding virtues—anger over courage, terror over caution, fear over obedience, passion over charity—unless we seek the sort of “mental elevation” that “bids us constantly to ‘think those things that are above.’”¹³ However for Gregory, this mental elevation, was a glorious probability because of man’s inherent “upward reach.” Eschewing the doctrine of depravity which colored other theologians’ thought, Gregory believed that man—at least the mind of man which reflected the image of God—was inherently good. A created being will by definition change, but “if it acts according to its nature the change is ever to the better.”¹⁴

The problems seemed to come from the senses—the appetites and passions that characterize the flesh. Therefore, true progress, the change for the better than comes naturally to the divine image in man, occurs once the mind is liberated from the body at death. Like a clay pot weakened by impurities, death allowed man to be ground down, “emptied...of the material which had been mixed with it,” and remade “by the Resurrection without any admixture of the contrary matter.”¹⁵ In a fascinating exegesis of Genesis 3:21, Gregory asserts that in giving to fallen Adam and Eve “coats of skins” (which would have required the death of an animal), God

¹² Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XVIII:6.

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XVIII:5; see Col. 3:1–2.

¹⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” chp. 8.

¹⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” chp. 8.

had in fact “invested man . . . with that capacity of dying which had been the special attribute of the brute creation.”¹⁶ Death was therefore a gift, in that it allowed for the dissolution of the body—a jettisoning of the “heavy and earthy elements” which slowed man’s heavenly ascent. “Once [the soul] is released from its earthly attachment, it becomes light and swift for its movement upward, soaring from below up to the heights. If nothing comes from above to hinder its upward thrust (for the nature of the Good attracts to itself those who look to it), the soul rises ever higher and will always make its flight yet higher—by its desire of the heavenly things.”¹⁷

Once free of this mortal weight, the mind of man can progress freely and endlessly toward God, who is Himself infinite. In fact, it is God’s endlessness and perfection, combined with man’s permanent mutability, that allow man’s progress to likewise be infinite. As Gregory affirmed, “That which is always in motion, if its progress be to good, will never cease moving onwards to what lies before it, by reason of the infinity of the course to be traversed.”¹⁸ Thus is it *progress*, not mere *existence*, which is eternal, the mind’s “advance ha[ving] no check, because no goal of the course to be traversed can be reached.”¹⁹ Seen in this light, immutability in man would have been a curse—a cessation of the climb, a halting of progress, a “damning” of the mind’s upward flow. Instead, the journey would forever remain without end, though not without aim. In Gregory’s thought, each traveler would forever say with Paul (in a verse Gregory frequently repeated):

Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth [epekteinomenos] unto those things

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” chp. 8.

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses*, 113.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, “On the Making of Man,” XXI:2.

¹⁹ Gregory of Nyssa, “The Great Catechism,” chp. 21.

which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus (Philip. 3:13–14).

Though Gregory found the Greek word for this “reaching forth” within this verse alone, he discerned the principle of *epektasis*, or perpetual progress, elsewhere in Scripture. In commenting on the Song of Songs, he wrote of the bride’s desire for the immortal bridegroom, eternally running after the scent of perfume. “Oh, how the soul likened to a horse runs on the divine course! How she leaps and bounds toward what lies before her and does not turn back! And still she thirsts. The intensity of her thirst has become so great that she is not satisfied with the cup of wisdom. The entire cup is not enough to quench her thirst.”²⁰ Unlike the appetites of the body—in this instance, thirst—the appetite of the mind is never satisfied.²¹ “The soul which looks to God . . . is never dulled by satiety. . . . Anything great and marvelous always seems inferior in comparison to what succeeds it.”²² When it comes to spiritual things, the soul can simultaneously be both full and famished, thrilled with what it has, yet thirsting for more. Thus Paul could ascend to the third heaven (2 Cor. 12:2) and still “reach forth” even higher. Moreover, Paul could “die daily” (1 Cor. 15:31), Gregory argued, “because at all times he partook of a new life, being dead to the past and forgetful of previous things.”²³ A bride, called to arise by such a Bridegroom, “can always rise further, and one who runs to the Lord will always have wide open spaces before him.”²⁴

²⁰ Gregory of Nyssa, “Commentary on the Song of Songs,”

²¹ Speaking of physical appetites, Gregory writes, “Those who yearn after the pleasures of the clay and keep on filling themselves with them never keep the space which receives them full; for although it is always being filled, it becomes empty again before the next pouring.” *Life of Moses*, 68.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, “Commentary on the Song of Songs,”

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, “Commentary on the Song of Songs,”

²⁴ Gregory of Nyssa, “Commentary on the Song of Songs,”

For Gregory then, existence, both during life and after death, took the shape of Jacob's ladder (Gen. 28:12). But unlike the angels in Jacob's dream (or in Origen's system), there was little danger of descent. The "limited potentialities of evil" would eventually be exhausted, while "growth in good [could] have no term."²⁵ In fact, continued ascent only whet the appetite for still more dizzying climbs. As Gregory taught, the mind's "prior accomplishments renew its intensity for the flight. Activity directed towards virtue causes its capacity to grow through exertion; this kind of activity alone does not slacken its intensity by the effort, but increases it."²⁶ Onward and upward, the mind "continually remains stable in the good; in a certain sense, it is always being created while ever changing for the better in its growth in perfection. . . . Its present state of goodness, even if especially great and perfect, is only the beginning of a more transcendent, better stage."²⁷ In a twist on the lamentation of Paul, man will ideally be "ever learning," knowing that they will still never come to a full "knowledge of the truth" (2 Tim. 3:7).

As one writer suggests, "This notion of 'perpetual progress,' or *epektasis*, is arguably Gregory's most important contribution to Christian thought."²⁸ It speaks to the majesty of God and the goodness of man, the divine drawing out of humanity's "upward reach." It is "perhaps Gregory's most vivid way of expressing the Christian conviction of God's transcendent freedom and objectivity: faith is *always*, not only in this life, a longing and trust directed away from itself towards an object to which it will never be adequate, which it will never comprehend."²⁹ It is

²⁵ J. Patout Burns, "The Economy of Salvation: Two Patristic Traditions," *Theological Studies* 37 (December 1976): 605–06.

²⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, "Life of Moses," 2:225–30.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, "Commentary on the Song of Songs,"

²⁸ Kristina Robb-Dover, "Gregory of Nyssa's 'Perpetual Progress,'" *Theology Today* 65 (2008): 213.

²⁹ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1990), 57–58.

Michelangelo's "Creation of Adam" on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel—God and Man, never quite able to touch, but forever reaching out to one another.